Submission to the National Museum of Australia Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs

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This submission concentrates on the changing role of the museum in contemporary society and presents a conceptual framework for considering representations of Australia's past in them. Before addressing the role of the museum, however, I wish to provide a brief overview of Australia's historical and contemporary understanding of itself.[i] This is important as much of the current debate about 'culture wars' and the portrayal of Australian history exist in reference to long standing competing discourses on the Australian.

Australian culture is marked by two master narratives; the first is of celebration and the second of critique. The heroic vision of Australia peaked in the late 1950s, this saw writers, artists and commentators actively searching for a truly "exceptional" Australian identity. Writers such as Donald Horne (1964), Russel Ward (1958), Arthur Phillips (1958) and Craig McGregor (1966) provided compelling and detailed accounts of Australian mythologies. A pivotal claim was that in the 1890s, in particular, we could find the origins of Australian national identity. Scholars in this tradition argued that during this era an essential and unique national character and culture was fixed by asserting difference from the mother country. Emphasis was given to the role of the media such as the popular magazine The Bulletin. This had played a part in institutionalising iconic representations of "the Australian" and imprinting national values. For example the "coming man" was a muscular rural youth building a future through hard work. He existed in a binary contrast with the "new chum" – the effete, recently arrived settler from England who lacked a larrikin spirit. Bushrangers, pioneers, swagmen and stockmen also featured in this sunburnt, "truly Australian" landscape of droughts, floods and bushfires. A particular value pattern also accrued to such a halcyon if elemental Australia. It was the land where companionate mateship, personal autonomy and suspicion of hierarchy were the dominant cultural codes of popular solidarity.

Aside from the trials of the bush other events have been advanced as pivotal to forging this Australian identity. These included the convict past, debates about Federation and national independence and frontier-style gold rush life. Rising above all these in significance, however, has been the celebration of the mythology of Gallipoli. The landings of Australian troops in Turkey during World War One were understood as a national coming of age – a collective drama in which themes of blood sacrifice and heroic manly solidarity took centre stage (Bean 1934). Within the popular imagination contrasts were subsequently drawn between the egalitarian spirit and fighting abilities of the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) troops and the pompous and incompetent British officers who sent them to their deaths. Portrayals and scholarship in this tradition sets out to validate Australian experiences and Australian artistic and literary traditions as well as to document them.

Through the mid-20th century, however, there existed subordinate genres of critique from both left and right, calling for the narrative deflation of Australian

mythologies. From an elitist perspective, heroic visions of the nation were contested, with Australia seen as the land of the low-brow and as riddled with insecurities. Where Australia had prospered by its wealth of natural resources, it was thought that its egalitarianism and anti-intellectual nature would not sustain it through economic change away from primary production. Thus Donald Horne's The Lucky Country (1964), in effect, saw Australia characterised by mediocrity that had somehow muddled through without intellectual excellence or a sense of direction. Horne's scorn was not solely directed at the lower classes. A principal concern was that Australia lacked an educated class familiar and comfortable with the humanist cannon (1964:172). Robert Hughes's influential The Art of Australia (1966) mimics and further illustrates this pattern. Far from championing the art of his native country, the young Hughes systematically attacks its derivative and mediocre qualities. For Hughes these paintings were evidence of a "…grotesque cultural nationalism…part of a general insularity" (1966: 22). In his vision the chief merit of Australian art was simply that it provided a "…laboratory for the study of the impact of foreign schemata on a provincial culture" (1966: 24). Another alleged flaw in the national psyche was the desire to cut high fliers down to size. This is sometimes spoken of as the "tall poppy syndrome" and can be thought of as the flip side of the dominant ethos of egalitarian individualism. The argument was made that achievement was stifled in Australia by a failure to value excellence.

A further line of opposition to the heroic vision of Australian culture came from an established leftist tradition. Curiously this shared with elitist criticism a vision of Australia as a land of mediocrity and failed opportunity. It also ploughed under the idea that there was anything distinctive or autochthonous about Australian national identity and culture. The myth that a national character had sprung Spartoi-like from the red soil of the bush and the hearty mateship of the pioneers was disputed. To the contrary, leftist scholars highlighted the pivotal role of Australia's inferiority complex viz-a-viz its motherland (Britain), the derivative quality of its value patterns and the fact that this pathetic reality was altogether typical of colonial nations. Manning Clark's (1980) essay "The quest for an Australian identity" best illustrates this perspective, emphasising the "imaginary" and structural factors behind the Australian type. According to Clark, Australia's search for identity is part of a wider quest for self-definition amongst white settlers and was characterised by both ambivalence and incompleteness. Cobbled together from British and American sources, this was the product of a dependent culture rather than an authentic and creative expression of a genuine popular and Australian experience.

It is a curiosity of intellectual history to observe that such discourses, whilst attacking the premises of the heroic vision of Australian culture can also be read as sharing in a broader nationalist agenda. The critics of Australia were not so much anti-Australian or anti-national as simply disappointed. A common sub-text to Horne, Clark, Hughes and others of their ilk is that Australia had failed to live up to its potential. Reading their works one is reminded of the expression "could try harder" in a school report. Despite opportunities it had been unable to convert popular egalitarianism into a true

democracy, neglected to develop a truly Australian culture, and stifled the artistic and intellectual excellence that it deserved. Whereas the heroic vision of Australia thought we had arrived, the critics saw Australia's potential unfulfilled. In so doing they cast an ironic shadow on a complacent discourse of national celebration. Such criticism however was to serve as a springboard for subsequent critical perspectives that have gone further in attacking the nation.

The present concern over 'culture wars' and the 'black arm-band' view of Australia's past emerges from a belief that that there has been a fundamental shift in the power relation between the discourses of celebration and critique towards the latter, where the nature of criticism, once part of debate on the nation, has mutated into anti-Australianess. Certainly specific images of the Australian, are no longer simply seen as kitsch or comparative but increasingly understood by scholars, and to a less extent the public, as invented myths underpinned by interests and ideologies. Hence Gallipoli and bush mythology have been re-read as deeply sexist. The bush and Anzac legends are seen less as important historical moments for a new nation, and more as a celebration of Australian masculinity. Other aspects of the Australian legend have come under direct attack. Where the origins of national identity were once located in the objective social conditions of convict settlement and pastoral frontier, contemporary scholars have argued that bush visions were largely an invention of city based journalists who held a romanticised view of rural life. The bush ideal in turn was used to propagate and legitimate racial and gender prejudice. Other efforts focused on capturing the migrant experience and restoring dignity to indigenous Australians through the critique of dominant national representations and historical accounts as the self-serving mythologies of an Anglo-Celtic majority.

I will not speculate here on the National Museum of Australia's association with this intellectual shift or the desirability of such representations of the past. I will, however, briefly consider the changing role of the museum within this context and then outline a framework to classify portrayals of Australian history beyond moralistic judgements of what is good or bad history and the limited debates about historical accuracy of museum exhibits.

Museums, once seen as principal agents of the state in maintaining the status quo, are now challenging what it traditionally meant to be a museum. Faced with competition from various other leisure pursuits, 'new' museums are diversifying their content and engaging with controversial subject matter. Examples of this can be found with the [Holocaust Museum](#) in Washington DC; the [Museum of Famine](#) in Ireland; exhibitions on colonialism, such as the politically sensitive '[Frontier Conflict](#)' at the National Museum of Australia; the Smithsonian's Enola Gay exhibit representing the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States in WWII and that of [Japanese American internment](#) during World War II, also at the Smithsonian. Where privately funded museums in this climate are thriving with the freedom of interpreting the past, controversy and debate continuously dogs government funded galleries as curtailers move away from the conventional to attract visitors, satisfy their own artistic desires and maintain intellectual integrity amongst peers. In other instances museums have undertaken less

controversial, more 'neutral' viewpoints of the past in order to limit conflict with government, other conservative funding sources, and 'minority' associations and pressure groups, however, in doing so they provide less than compelling ideological reflections about society and history, a key role and function of museums. At worst this strategy is infused with excessive 'living history' and new virtual media, making museums more like the theatre or a theme park (This is not to say that such portrayals and technologies cannot play a central role in portraying significant interpretations on history and culture). While these provide entertaining spectacles, if museums are to facilitate understanding of their society and embed history with substantive meaning, the problem of historical representation in a plural, educated and ever critically aware society remains.

In the context of these competing cultural expectations, the value of a portrayal of past or the worth of a particular historical exhibit is difficult to judge. This is especially the case since from a relative perspective historical accuracy has become a problematic criterion for assessment. I argue that consideration of historical and societal representations in museums can be organised around the central concept of narrative. The idea of narrative has been a key idea in recent social scientific theorising about society. Narrative is a core element of how individuals and groups see themselves in relation to a larger community. It is a template we use in explaining significant events and the template we refer to in coming to terms with our past. As this is not the place to go into a detailed outline of narrative analysis, I will restrict myself to a discussion of the two genres most relevant to national museum exhibits, romance and tragedy, and briefly illustrate how narrative considerations apply to museum exhibits and portrayals of history.

In the genre category of romance the protagonists have great powers and there are clear distinctions between good and evil. Portrayed as an adventure, the story is characterised by wish fulfilment with the hero triumphing over the enemy. In the genre of tragedy the protagonists also have great powers but the hero(es) will ultimately fall, seen as an inevitable end according to external factors of fate. This is of course a simple summary, however, in various manifestations these are the dominant genres, the framework that we interpret the past through. This is the case whether we are considering traditional or non traditional heroes, the story of minorities or national cultures, revolutionary or conservative values.

Using narrative as a classification model we can consider functional and dysfunctional portrayals of the past beyond the limited debate of historical accuracy or subject matter. Debate in relation to the latter is misguided as any history of Australia, and certainly the case for both the heroic and the so called 'black arm-band' history of Australia, needs to contend with a number of significant factors and events that 'demand' narration: Aboriginal culture and dispossession, European convict 'settlement', physical and cultural distinctions with Britain and Europe, multiculturalism and civil nationalism, urban and rural divides and anti-heroes and the celebration/commemoration of military and exploratory defeat. As a whole, it is not what is represented but how it is which is a principal concern in considering representations of Australian history.

When judging the worth of exhibits we should be alert to the presence of a romantic dimension as this genre points to the future with optimism and promotes participation in civil society. This is to say nothing about what history should be considered, what actors' stories to recover or the emphasis that is placed on pain and injustice of individuals or peoples. It rather highlights that if the past is solely interpreted within a tragic narrative without the romantic dimension, conflicts and crises become understood as permanent and irreconcilable. As narratives are more than simple commentaries on events, such pessimistic portrayals can limit the ability to heal wounds and reconcile with our past. The romantic narrative does not prevent a critical assessment of the past and present but it does so in a way that projects, and in so doing facilitates, reconciliation of opposing entities. By contrast, a tragic narrative may similarly concentrate on the evils of the past but the plot is one of ultimate failure where it is difficult to image a future public unity. It is a resigning acceptance of an evil "already there and already evil" (Ricoeur 1967:313).

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[i] Much of this part of the submission is adapted from the chapter "Interpreting the Australian" that Philip Smith and I wrote for the *Cambridge Handbook of the Social Sciences in Australia* Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2003.